

US food banks struggle to feed hungry amid surging prices

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) —

U.S. food banks already dealing with increased demand from families sidelined by the pandemic now face a new challenge — surging food prices and supply chain issues walloping the nation.

The higher costs and limited availability mean some families may get smaller servings or substitutions for staples such as peanut butter, which costs nearly double what it did a year ago. As holidays approach, some food banks worry they won't have enough stuffing and cranberry sauce for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"What happens when food prices go up is food insecurity for those who are experiencing it just gets worse," said Katie Fitzgerald, chief operating officer of Feeding America, a nonprofit organization that coordinates the efforts of more than 200 food banks across the country.

Food banks that expanded to meet unprecedented demand brought on by the pandemic won't be able to absorb forever food costs that are two to three times what they used to be, she said.

Supply chain disruptions, lower inventory and labor shortages have all contributed to increased costs for charities on which tens of millions of people in the U.S. rely on for nutrition.

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Continued from Front

Donated food is more expensive to move because transportation costs are up, and bottlenecks at factories and ports make it difficult to get goods of all kinds.

If a food bank has to swap out for smaller sizes of canned tuna or make substitutions in order to stretch their dollars, Fitzgerald said, it's like adding "insult to injury" to a family reeling from uncertainty.

In the prohibitively expensive San Francisco Bay Area, the Alameda County Community Food Bank in Oakland is spending an extra \$60,000 a month on food. Combined with increased demand, it is now shelling out \$1 million a month to distribute 4.5 million pounds (2 million kilograms) of food, said Michael Altfest, the Oakland food bank's director of community engagement.

Pre-pandemic, it was spending a quarter of the money for 2.5 million pounds (1.2 million kilograms) of food.

The cost of canned green beans and peaches is up nearly 9% for them, Altfest said; canned tuna and frozen tilapia up more than 6%; and a case of 5-pound frozen chickens for holiday tables is up 13%. The price for dry oatmeal has climbed 17%.

On Wednesdays, hundreds of people line up outside a church in east Oakland for its weekly food giveaway. Shiloh Mercy House feeds about 300 families on those days,

far less than the 1,100 families it was nourishing at the height of the pandemic, said Jason Bautista, the charity's event manager. But he's still seeing new people every week. "And a lot of people are just saying they can't afford food," he said. "I mean they have the money to buy certain things, but it's just not stretching."

Families can also use a community market Shiloh opened in May. Refrigerators contain cartons of milk and eggs while sacks of hamburger buns and crusty baguettes sit on shelves.

Oakland resident Sonia Lujan-Perez, 45, picked up chicken, celery, onions bread and and potatoes — enough to supplement a Thanksgiving meal for herself, 3-year-old daughter and 18-year-old son. The state of California pays her to care for daughter Melanie, who has special needs, but it's not enough with monthly rent at \$2,200 and the cost of milk, citrus, spinach and chicken so high.

"That is wonderful for me because I will save a lot of money," she said, adding that the holiday season is rough with Christmas toys for the children.

Many people also rely on other government aid, including the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Kate Waters, a spokeswoman for the USDA, which administers the SNAP program, said there were no immediate plans for an emergen-

cy boost in SNAP benefits to compensate for the rising food costs. But she said that previous moves by the Biden administration such as the permanent increase in SNAP benefits earlier this year and a fresh wave of funding for food banks should help ease the burden. In addition, Waters said the fact that schools are open and offering free lunches and, in some cases, free breakfast, should also help.

Bryan Nichols, vice president of sales for Transnational Foods Inc., which delivers to more than 100 food banks associated with Feeding America, said canned foods from Asia— such as fruit cocktail, pears and mandarin oranges— have been stuck overseas because of a lack of shipping container space.

Issues in supply seem to be improving and prices stabilizing, but he expects costs to stay high after so many people got out of the shipping business during the pandemic. "An average container coming from Asia prior to COVID would cost about \$4,000. Today, that same container is about \$18,000," he said.

At the Care and Share Food Bank for Southern Colorado in Colorado Springs, CEO Lynne Telford says the cost for a truckload of peanut butter —40,000 pounds (18,100 kilograms)—has soared 80% from June 2019 to \$51,000 in August. Mac and cheese is up 19% from a year ago and the wholesale cost of ground

beef has increased 5% in three months. They're spending more money to buy food to make up for waning donations and there's less to choose from.

The upcoming holidays worry her. For one thing, the donation cost to buy a frozen turkey has increased from \$10 to \$15 per bird.

"The other thing is that we're not getting enough holiday food, like stuffing and cranberry sauce. So we're having to supplement with other kinds of food, which you know, makes us sad," said Telford, whose food bank fed more than 200,000 people last year, distributing 25 million pounds (11.3 million kilograms) of food.

Alameda County Community Food Bank says it is set for Thanksgiving, with cases of canned cranberry and boxes of mashed potatoes among items stacked in its expanded warehouse. Food resourcing director Wilken Louie ordered eight truckloads of frozen 5-pound chickens —which translates into more than 60,000 birds— to give away free, as well as half-turkeys available at cost.

For that, Martha Hasal is grateful.

"It's going to be an expensive Thanksgiving, turkey is not going to cost like the way it was," said Hasal as she loaded up on cauliflower and onions on behalf of the Bay Area American Indian Council. "And they're not giving out turkey. So thank God they're giving out the chicken." □

Alabama boy named world's most premature infant to survive



BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — An Alabama boy who weighed less than a pound at birth after his mother went into labor at only 21

weeks and one day of gestation has been certified as the world's most premature baby to survive. Guinness World Records

and UAB Hospital announced Wednesday that Curtis Means, who weighed only 14.8 ounces (420 grams) at birth, set the new record. Born 132 days premature on July 5, 2020 with a twin who didn't survive, Curtis is now healthy and 16 months old.

Dr. Brian Sims, who was the attending physician, said statistics show that children born so young have virtually no chance of survival, but Curtis beat the odds.

"We typically advise for compassionate care in situations of such extremely

preterm births," Sims said in a statement from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, which operates the hospital. "This allows the parents to hold their babies and cherish what little time they may have together." Instead, Curtis grew stronger and stronger and was discharged after 275 days in the hospital. He needed help from therapists to begin using his mouth and eating. "Being able to finally take Curtis home and surprise my older children with their younger brother is a moment I will always re-

member," mother Michelle Butler of rural Eutaw, Alabama, said in a statement. A fetus is considered full term at 40 weeks, but Butler went into labor after carrying twins just over half that length of time. She was transferred to UAB Hospital, which has a regional neonatal intensive care unit, where she gave birth to Curtis and C'Asya.

C'Asya died a day later, but Curtis was able to come off a ventilator after three months. Following months of round-the-clock care, he went home in April. □

Court filings: Maduro ally met with US prior to arrest

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A businessman accused of siphoning off millions in state contracts from Venezuela met secretly with U.S. law enforcement to provide intelligence against Nicolás Maduro's government prior to being charged in 2019 with money laundering, according to new filings in a related case against a disgraced University of Miami professor.

Bruce Bagley, who prior to his arrest in 2019 had been a top expert on organized crime in Latin America, is set to be sentenced next week in Manhattan federal court on two counts of money laundering tied to nearly \$3 million in payments he received from the businessman, Alex Saab.

In a request for leniency, Bagley's attorney argued that his client was told that the payments, the bulk of which he forwarded to an unnamed intermediary's bank account, were to conceal payments to attorneys in the U.S. who accompanied Saab to meetings in which he allegedly provided law enforcement officials intelligence on Venezuela's government.

"It is uncontradicted," attorney Peter Quijano wrote in a heavily-redacted 27-page sentencing memorandum filed Wednesday, that Saab and the intermediary came up with "this wire-transfer method in order to hide Saab's payments to U.S. attorneys from prying eyes in Venezuela."

Saab was extradited last month to the U.S. from Cape Verde following a bitter legal fight that has strained relations between Washington and Caracas. The U.S. has described Saab as the main conduit for corruption in Venezuela, someone who reaped huge windfall profits from dodgy contracts to import food while millions in the South American nation starved. The Maduro government considers him a diplomat who was "kidnapped" while on a humanitarian mission made more urgent by U.S. sanctions.



It's not clear what was discussed at the meetings, which have not been previously reported, nor whether Saab offered any meaningful assistance or simply used the opportunity to sniff out information about the U.S. probe into his own activities.

But Bagley's explanation tracks with the account of three people familiar with the investigation into Saab who said that he met with U.S. federal law enforcement, including agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration, on multiple occasions in Colombia and Europe prior to being charged in 2019. The three individuals spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to discuss the meetings.

U.S. prosecutors and investigators frequently meet with criminal suspects outside the U.S. when they are seeking to recruit them to provide assistance against a bigger target in exchange for promises of confidentiality and the possibility of leniency.

But any meetings attended by Saab would have entailed major risks for the Colombian-born businessman given his close ties to Venezuela's ruling elite, including Maduro's own family.

Federal prosecutors in Miami indicted Saab in 2019 on money-laundering charges connected to an alleged bribery scheme

that pocketed more than \$350 million from a low-income housing project for the Venezuelan government.

Separately, Saab was sanctioned by the previous Trump administration for allegedly utilizing a network of shell companies spanning the globe — in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Hong Kong, Panama, Colombia and Mexico — to hide huge profits from no-bid, overvalued food contracts obtained through bribes and kickbacks. Several of his associates, including a long-time business partner and a pro-government former governor, were indicted last month for involvement in the alleged scheme.

Some of Saab's contracts were obtained by paying bribes to the adult children of Venezuelan first lady Cilia Flores, the Trump administration alleged when it announced the sanctions. Commonly known in Venezuela as "Los Chamos," slang for "the kids," the three — children of Flores from a previous relationship — have themselves been under investigation by prosecutors in Miami for several years. Henry Bell, an attorney for Saab, did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment. The U.S. attorney's office in Miami, which is handling the investigation into Saab, declined to comment.

Bagley's role in Saab's alleged graft network appears to have been relatively minor.

Saab initially hired Bagley to help get a student visa for his son and later sought his advice on investments in Guatemala, according to prosecutors. Then starting around November 2017, Bagley began receiving monthly deposits of approximately \$200,000 from a purported food company based in the United Arab Emirates. Additional funds were wired from an account in Switzerland.

He then transferred 90% of the money into the accounts controlled by an informant in the belief they would be forwarded to Saab's U.S. attorneys. But Bagley kept a 10% commission for himself and continued to accept the cash even after one of his accounts was closed for suspicious activity. In total he received nearly \$3 million, according to prosecutors.

The informant's name is redacted from Wednesday's sentencing memorandum. But in court last year to plead guilty, Bagley identified him as Jorge Luis Hernandez, a longtime U.S. informant in anti-narcotics cases from his native Colombia better known by his nickname Boli. He's also served as a broker connecting narcos with American defense attorneys.

Bagley, an expert on Co-

lombia's criminal underworld, had provided testimony in support of Hernandez when he applied for asylum in the U.S. arguing he would be killed if he were deported to Colombia, where he had ties with right-wing paramilitary groups who then dominated drug trafficking along the the Caribbean coast.

Over the years, Hernandez proposed to Bagley lucrative business proposals to provide consulting services to top politicians from around Latin America, including a Colombian governor, Kiko Gomez, with ties to far-right militias and an unnamed presidential candidate from Paraguay.

On one occasion in 2019, Bagley traveled to New York to meet with Luis Dominguez Trujillo, a presidential hopeful from the Dominican Republic and grandson of the Caribbean island's former dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Unbeknownst to Bagley at the time, the meeting was being surveilled at the direction of New York prosecutors.

"But Dr. Bagley, who was not motivated by the lure of a great deal of money, rejected (Boli's) job offer to work for a seemingly shady politician, thus defeating that particular attempt of (Boli) to deliver a defendant," Quijano wrote.

When Bagley did finally yield to Hernandez's entreaties, he thought it was to protect Saab from possible retaliation by powerful officials in Venezuela if they were to suspect he was cooperating with the United States, Bagley's attorney said.

"The concern was not with the United States becoming aware of these payments but individuals in and the government of Venezuela discovering them," Quijano wrote. "Saab agreed with (Boli) that their financial connection would make many important people in Venezuela nervous, considering his close ties to some of the government officials there. For the same reason, Saab could not pay his attorneys in the United States directly." □

As cities grow, wastewater recycling gets another look



By BRITTANY PETERSON and SAM METZ Associated Press DENVER (AP) — Around the U.S., cities are increasingly warming to an idea that once induced gags: Sterilize wastewater from toilets, sinks and factories, and eventually pipe it back into homes and businesses as tap water.

In the Los Angeles area, plans to recycle wastewater for drinking are moving along with little fanfare just two decades after similar efforts in the city sparked such a backlash they had to be abandoned. The practice, which must meet federal drinking water standards, has been adopted in several places around the country, including nearby Orange County. "We've had a sea change in terms of public attitudes toward wastewater recycling," said David Nahai, the former general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

The shifting attitudes around a concept once dismissively dubbed "toilet to tap" come as dry regions scramble for ways to increase water supplies as their populations boom and climate change intensifies droughts. Other strategies gaining traction include collecting runoff from streams and roads after storms, and stripping seawater of salt and other minerals, a process that's still relatively rare and expensive. Though there are still only about two dozen communities in the U.S. using some form of recycled water for drinking, that number is projected to more than double in the next 15 years, according to WaterReuse, a group that helps cities adopt such conservation practices. In most places that do it, the sterilized water is usually mixed back into a lake, river or other natural source before being reused — a

step that helps make the idea of drinking treated sewage go down easier for some. Funding for more wastewater recycling projects is on the way. The bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress has \$1 billion for water reuse projects in the West, including the \$3.4 billion project in Southern California. And tucked into the federal budget reconciliation package being debated is \$125 million in grants for alternative water sources nationwide that could include reuse technologies. The Southern California project would be the nation's largest wastewater recycling program, producing enough water to supply 500,000 homes, according to the Metropolitan Water District, which serves 19 million people in Los Angeles and surrounding counties. In Colorado, over two dozen facilities already recycle water for non-drinking pur-

poses, which is more affordable than cleaning it for drinking. But growing populations mean cities could need to pull additional supply from the Colorado River, which is already strained from overuse. At that point, it might make sense to start recycling for drinking purposes as well, said Greg Fisher, head of demand planning for Denver Water. To warm residents to the idea, Colorado Springs Utilities is hosting a mobile exhibit that shows how wastewater recycling works. On a cold, rainy afternoon, dozens of visitors showed up to learn about the carbon-based purification process and sample the results, which several noted tasted no different than their usual supply. The recycling process typically entails disinfecting wastewater with ozone gas or ultraviolet light to remove viruses and bacteria, then filtering it through membranes with microscopic pores to remove solids and trace contaminants. Not all water can be recycled locally. Often, Western communities are required to send treated wastewater back to its source, so that it can eventually be used by other places

that depend on that same body of water. "You have to put the water back into the river because it's not yours," said Patricia Sinicropi, executive director of WaterReuse. As a result, much of the country already consumes water that's been recycled to some degree, simply by living downstream from others. It's why drinking water undergoes stringent sterilization even when it's pulled from a river or lake that looks clean. Encouraged by efforts in other cities, even places with stable water supplies are considering recycling their own wastewater. After a poll showed broad support for the idea in Boise, Idaho, city officials began studying plans to recharge local groundwater with treated wastewater. "We need to be managing for the potential impacts of climate change," said Haley Falconer, a senior manager in the city's environmental division. The Southern California project, which still needs to undergo environmental review and finalize its funding plan, would also lessen the region's need to pipe in water from afar. In exchange for financing from water agencies in Nevada and Arizona, the area is ceding some of its share of the Colorado River. "We're taking advantage of a water supply that's right here in our backyard," said Deven Upadhyay, chief operating officer for the Metropolitan Water District. Officials emphasize the project uses technology that's been used safely elsewhere, including in Israel and Singapore. The reassurances have become critical after a separate Los Angeles wastewater treatment plant, which uses a different process to purify water for irrigation and industrial purposes, flooded and spilled sewage into the ocean in July. "The last thing that any of us want is one of these projects that have a water quality hiccup that sets back public perception," Upadhyay said. □



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As many try living with virus, China keeps up zero tolerance

By HUIZHONG WU

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Wang Lijie planned to spend three days in the Gobi Desert last month to take in the area's famous poplar forest as its trees turned a golden yellow.

Instead, the Beijing resident has been stuck for more than three weeks, much of it in quarantine, after authorities discovered a cluster of COVID-19 cases in a nearby city.

He was among more than 9,000 tourists who became trapped in Ejin Banner, a remote part of China's Inner Mongolia region that is in the Gobi.

As vaccination rates rise in many parts of the world and even countries that previously had strict COVID-containment strategies gingerly ease restrictions, China is doubling down on its zero-tolerance policy.

China pioneered that approach of strict lockdowns, multiple rounds of mass testing and centralized quarantine during the world's first major outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan. And it continues now, even as it says it has fully vaccinated 77% of its 1.4 billion people and started giving booster shots. "The cost is truly rather high, but compared with not managing it, relaxing (the zero-tolerance policy), then that cost is even higher," Zhong Nanshan, a top government doctor, said in a recent TV interview.

The impact of the restrictions is not widespread but unpredictable. Unlucky travelers can find themselves in the wrong place



Associated Press

at the wrong time, like the tourists in the Gobi Desert, some of whom were bused 18 hours to finish their quarantine in another city. People from Beijing have complained online about leaving for a work trip and not being able to return home. In a sign of the effect the regulations can have even on thriving businesses, the wildly popular hotpot restaurant chain, Haidilao, decided to shutter 300 outlets in part because of the pandemic and is scaling back a plan to add 1,200 new ones. The strain has been particularly felt in places like Ruili, a city in the southwest that has been locked down repeatedly this year. But for authorities in Beijing, control over the virus has become a point of pride, a potent tool of propaganda and proof, they say, of a superior form of governance. They often trumpet their

success at keeping deaths relatively low, especially in contrast to the United States, whose COVID-19 response the Foreign Ministry spokesman has called a "total failure."

China has reported about 4,600 deaths compared to more than 755,000 in the U.S., a country with less than a quarter the population. "It's becoming part of the official narrative that promotes that approach and links that to the superiority of the Chinese political system," said Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

It's impossible to tell how much popular support the policies have since opinion polls are rare and criticism often censored. When Zhang Wenhong, a doctor in Shanghai who has been compared to top American health official Antho-

ny Fauci, briefly raised the prospect of living with the virus, he was shut down by official criticism and a plagiarism investigation.

But the head of China's Center for Disease Control, Gao Fu, recently suggested the country could open up once it is 85% vaccinated a sign the government is aware that at least some are eager for that.

In the last three and a half weeks, Wang has had 18 tests for COVID-19. Yet, he isn't complaining. He's able to work remotely and has started a vlog of his daily life, interacting with residents of Inner Mongolia online.

"Regardless of the time you sacrificed, or how much money you spent, in the face of life, in front of health, those things are not worth mentioning," said Wang. "For everyone's health, for society to be

more stable, some people have to make sacrifices."

But China's strategy sets it apart, as many countries shift to trying to live with the virus, especially as it continues to mutate and vaccines cannot fully prevent infection. Most notably, New Zealand, which had long pursued a zero-tolerance approach, announced last month a cautious plan to ease restrictions, despite a simmering outbreak. Australia, Thailand and Singapore all of which imposed severe travel restrictions for much of the pandemic have also begun to open their borders.

China, by contrast, slashed the number of international passenger flights allowed into the country by 21% last month to 408 flights per week until late March, while increasing the number of cargo flights by 28%. In Singapore, which started allowing quarantine-free entry to fully vaccinated travelers from certain countries, the number of new cases has jumped to thousands a day from less than 100 before. But most are not winding up in the hospital. "It's just completely unrealistic to think that you can stay at zero," said Dale Fisher, a professor in the National University of Singapore's medical school. But even if only a small percentage of infected people end up in hospitals, that could be a problem in China, with its huge population — and would be especially complicated for a government that has staked its reputation on keeping numbers very low. □

Puerto Rico judge orders arrest of power company CEO

By DÁNICA COTO

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP)

— A Puerto Rico judge on Wednesday ordered the arrest of the CEO of Luma, the company that operates transmission and distribution of power in Puerto Rico, after he was accused of not submitting documents sought by legislators. The judge said that while

CEO Wayne Stensby had turned over a majority of documents that the island's House of Representatives demanded, two requests were still pending. The company had requested more time to turn over the documents, including receipts filed by employees, consultants and contractors and all communication between Stensby

with any Puerto Rico government official, including text messages and emails.

"The truth is that (they) have had at a minimum 233 days or 5,592 hours to have copied all the information to the any digital format of their choice," Judge Anthony Cuevas Ramos of the Court of First Instance wrote in his order.

"Unjustified delays cannot

be sponsored or blessed by this Court. We consider them a mockery to our judicial system."

The judge further wrote: "Nobody is above the Law. NOBODY."

Luma spokeswoman Gloria Soltero did not immediately return a message for comment.

Hours after the judge issued his order, Luma submitted

additional documents, although legislators said they needed several hours to go over them and meet with the company's attorneys to ensure they contain all the information sought.

That move prompted the judge to issue another ruling stating that the arrest order was still valid. □

Cyprus wants EU support for migrant crackdown as flows rise

By **MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS**
Associated Press

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — Cyprus said Wednesday it will seek European Union approval to stop processing asylum claims from migrants illegally entering the east Mediterranean island nation. Government spokesman Marios Pelekanos said a surge of new migrant arrivals is fueling serious crime, taxing state coffers and altering the country's demographics. Pelekanos said authorities would also press the EU to relocate a number of asylum seekers living in Cyprus to other bloc member countries and strike agreements with third countries to take back their citizens

who have had their asylum applications rejected. "The government is taking additional action as part of a comprehensive migration policy that respects human rights, but also protects the rights and interests of the country's citizens," Pelekanos told reporters. He said the ministries of defense, the interior and justice will draft recommendations on how to deal with the new inflows, while the EU's executive arm will be asked for assistance in line with decisions made to counter the migrant crisis on the borders of Lithuania and Poland. Pelekanos said that in just the first 10 months of this year, migrant arrivals were

up 38% compared to all of 2020. Of the 10,868 new arrivals, 9,270 illegally crossed a United Nations-controlled buffer zone from the breakaway Turkish Cypriot north to seek asylum in the internationally recognized south. The spokesman said asylum seekers comprise 4% of the population in the island's south — four times the average of other EU front-line states — and 16% of all primary school students are children of migrants. Pelekanos also said that migrants account for more than 43% of people implicated in serious crimes. According to Pelekanos, the government paid 178 million euros (\$205 million) between 2014-2020 for mi-



Associated Press

grant allowances and accommodation while 38 million euros were added to this year's budget to cover food and housing. Cyprus Refugee Council head Corina Droushiotou said that, although the country is facing a prob-

lem, it's unlikely that the EU would permit authorities not to process new asylum claims or that relocation procedures would be enacted soon. She said it's important that migrants continue to be allowed to apply for asylum. □



Associated Press

By **KAREL JANICEK**
Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — Coronavirus cases soared to a new record high in Slovakia on Wednesday, with some hospitals having to move COVID-19 patients elsewhere in the country because they couldn't take

any more. In neighboring Czech Republic, new infections jumped to levels close to record numbers seen during previous waves, authorities said. The Slovak Health Ministry reported that the daily increase of new infections hit

Daily COVID-19 infections jump in Czech Republic, Slovakia

7,055 on Tuesday, surpassing the previous record of 6,805 set last Thursday. The number of people needing hospital treatment rose to a total of 2,478, with 370 admitted this week, the ministry said. About 80% of the hospitalized have not been fully vaccinated. Slovakia has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the EU. Only 2.4 million people out of a population of nearly 5.5 million have been fully vaccinated. Some hospitals in western and eastern Slovakia say they have had to transport patients to other clinics in

the country because they were unable to treat more patients in serious condition. "We're facing a catastrophic development in hospitals," President Zuzana Caputova said. The vaccine rate needs to "significantly speed up," Caputova added. The Slovak government approved Wednesday new restrictions that include a right for employers to check whether their employees have been vaccinated, recovered from COVID-19 or tested negative on the coronavirus. Without presenting such

documents, employees would not be allowed entry into their workplace. The owners of bars and restaurant owners, as well organizers of public gatherings and events, will need to check the same for customers. Fines for forging the documents and for insulting medical personnel will be increased to 1,000 euros (\$1,155). In the Czech Republic, the Health Ministry said the daily tally of new cases reached 14,539 on Tuesday, about 4,500 more than a week ago and the highest number since March 12. □

'What fear?': Hindus bathe in frothy, polluted Indian river

By **SHONAL GANGULY and ALTAF QADRI**
Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — One of India's most sacred rivers appears to be coated with a thick layer of snow. Except it isn't. A vast stretch of the Yamuna river is covered with white toxic foam, caused in part by pollutants discharged from industries ringing New Delhi. Still, on Wednesday hun-

dreds of Hindu devotees stood knee-deep in its frothy, toxic waters, sometimes even immersing themselves for a holy dip to mark the festival of Chhath Puja. The 1,376-kilometer (855-mile) Yamuna is one of the holiest rivers for Hindus. It is also among the most polluted in the world. The river provides more than half of New Delhi's water, posing a serious health threat to its resi-

dents. It has become dirtier over the years as most of the capital's sewage, farm pesticides from neighboring states and industrial effluents from factory towns flow into the waterway despite laws against polluting. In a city that already has the world's most polluted air, a dangerously unhealthy waterway is a concern for many. Yet, devotees flock to it every year during the festival, which is dedicated



Associated Press

to the solar deity and is observed with holy bathing. Rajesh Kumar Verma was among those who offered prayers on Yamuna's banks on Wednesday. He knows

the water is harmful but stood in it anyway, unfazed by the health hazard. "What fear? If we are scared, then how can we pray?" he said. □

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Kishida reelected Japan's PM in parliamentary vote

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Fumio Kishida, reelected as Japan's prime minister on Wednesday after his governing party scored a major victory in key parliamentary elections, said the coronavirus remains the country's most urgent issue and pledged to take steps to mend the pandemic-battered economy.

Kishida, who briefly met with U.S. President Joe Biden at the U.N. climate summit last week, said he hopes to visit Washington by the end of the year to deepen the bilateral alliance amid growing concerns about China's rise in the Indo-Pacific.

Following his reelection by parliament on Wednesday, Kishida formed his second Cabinet by keeping all but one of the ministers he appointed when he took office on Oct. 4.

He said the pandemic, the economy and national security are his top priorities. "Coronavirus remains the most urgent issue," Kishida said at a late-night news conference, promising to



outline new measures later this week to prepare for any surge in cases.

They will include a significant increase in capacity at hospitals so patients can find beds if infections increase considerably from an earlier wave in the summer, he said. In mid-August, when new daily cases surged to about 25,000 and health care systems virtually collapsed, many patients were unable to find hospi-

tal beds and some died at home.

The government will distribute 600,000 doses of COVID-19 oral medicines to medical facilities by the end of December, and eventually secure 1 million more doses, he said. Japan will also begin booster shots next month for anyone 18 or older who received their second dose around eight months earlier, Kishida said. As Japan tries to gradu-

ally expand social and economic activities, Kishida said his government will gradually determine whether it is safe to allow the return of foreign tourists by experimenting with small-scale package tours. "The infections have slowed but we shouldn't be too optimistic," he said.

Kishida's immediate tasks also include compiling a major economic stimulus package of about 30 trillion

yen (\$265 billion) that will provide cash payouts and coupons for low-income households and those with children, to be announced next week measures some criticize as pork barrel spending. He also aims to pass an extra budget by the end of this year to fund the projects.

Kishida reiterated his pledge to create a self-reinforcing cycle of growth and economic distribution under his "new capitalism" economic policy by promoting salary increases. He plans to negotiate with labor and company management to promote pay hikes and to raise government-set salaries for jobs such as caregivers, kindergarten teachers and nurses. "I want everyone to actually feel the fruits of growth," he said.

As a former foreign minister, Kishida will continue to prioritize the Japan-U.S. security alliance and promote a vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" with other democracies, including Quad dialogue members the U.S., Australia and India. □

Nearly 30 killed in violence across Nigeria's north

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Nearly 30 people have been killed across Nigeria's north in violent attacks in recent days targeting rural areas and the police, locals and authorities said Wednesday.

The three attacks in the northern states of Zamfara, Katsina and Taraba occurred over the past 48 hours. While the attacks were not related, armed groups have been terrorizing local communities across the northwest and

central parts of Africa's most populous country.

Gunmen invaded two villages in the Karim Lamido local government area of Taraba state on Wednesday morning and opened fire on residents in what was said to be a reprisal after two herdsmen were allegedly killed. "People on motorcycles numbering 40 invaded the village and started shooting all over. People started to take to their heels for their dear lives and the village was deserted," police spokesperson Usman Abdullahi

told The Associated Press, adding local hunters have helped the police to restore peace in the area. He said the number of casualties has not been ascertained.

The Abuja-based Daily Trust newspaper reported 15 killed, quoting accounts from residents in the northcentral state. In the northwest Zamfara state, seven police officers were killed on Monday when gunmen ambushed them while on patrol, according to a resident who witnessed the aftermath of the attack along Magami

road about 35 kilometers (21 miles) from the state capital. Idris Yusuf told The AP the gunmen opened fire on the police vehicle carrying the officers. "They killed seven before the police arrived to take their bodies to the hospital," he said.

Barely 24 hours after, assailants invaded the Katoge and Yanturaku quarters of Batsari local government area in the neighbouring Katsina late Tuesday and killed 11 people, police spokesperson Gambo Isa said. Isa did not give details of the attacks other than

that the gunmen were "shooting sporadically with AK 47 rifles." No arrest has been made but the police have deployed additional personnel in the area "to beef up security and restore confidence on the affected communities", he added.

Security experts have told the AP that the gunmen terrorising rural communities in the West African nation are former Fulani herdsmen caught up in Nigeria's prolonged conflict between farmers and nomadic cattle herders. □

LOCAL



EAGLE BEACH — Alberto Perret Gentil is the for VP International Operations for the Pering Group, a 70 year old real estate development company with 20 years already in Aruba and four exclusive projects under their belt, all with beautiful ocean views and great amenities: Oceania Residences, Blue, Azure Beach Residences and Harbour House.

We catch up with Gentil inspecting the final details on the construction of The Villas at Azure Beach Residences.

We hear construction prices are increasing. What is your take?

"Construction costs have increased in the last year close to 28% for various reasons. Mainly factories closed worldwide due to Covid and caused a disruption in the supply chain with port capacity constraints in China among other places. The increase in materials and labor; steel prices through the roof due to lower production, trade wars, Canada not exporting wood to the US, less labor available given the subsidies and more restriction in immigration and a very long process etcetera.

Time to invest: Premium condominium and house prices in Aruba are going up

Also because of higher demand for goods as people stayed home during the pandemic without going out and spending on entertainment/restaurants and thus have more disposable income to buy stuff. Just to give you an idea; a container from China now costs \$22,000 vs \$5,500 previously. And on top, import duties in Aruba include the (increased) freight cost in its calculation (CIF value)."

Are these costs reflected in the condominium and house sales prices?

"Not yet but will sooner than later. After a market analysis of construction costs and behavior of condominium prices in the Caribbean and the US it is clear to me sales prices will increase shortly. Why?

Historically prices in Aruba have been 15% lower than Brickell-Miami; now they are 40% lower, and that gap will eventually close. In South Florida there are many factors for this price hike; people moving from NYC and California, low interest rates, better climate, the trend of a flexible workplace with the possibilities opened by the likes of Zoom and Google Meet, Blackstone and others, private equity funds buying residential real estate, higher construction costs, Latin Americans moving in driven away from socialist/communist regimes and so on.

And many of these factors should and will affect Aruba real estate prices as well. Workation and the trend of flexible workplaces is certainly one of them more so with 14 daily flights from/to the US. Aruba is safe, has the best infrastructure in the Caribbean and a much better climate and beaches than for example South Florida. By the way, not many people know this, but Aruba has the best internet in the Caribbean.

- Covid pretty much under control.
- A lot of outdoor space to roam around and with a great and sunny weather.
- Construction costs are already 25%-30% higher and sales prices have not adjusted (yet).
- Resale of Inventory by Venezuelans that bought as a weekend getaway eager to sell as they emigrated given the political circumstances will be reduced in this coming winter season.
- Very few oceanfront lands left for new condo developments and a moratorium for new condos in place. A simple equation of supply and demand."

What are you doing about it?

"Unfortunately for us we have very little inventory left for sale but will certainly increase prices as other developers are already doing. Pre- Covid prices are history.

We see another clear trend on longer stays, a high demand for premium houses and villas that are selling like crazy as people want to remain private (only one left at The Villas – Azure Beach Residences). Also, for townhouses with private pools, ground floor units and Pent Houses with the possibility of turning one room into an office. Contrary to my previous belief I even think there is room for oceanfront multi-million-dollar houses. Build them and those super rich will come. In the case of Harbour House we created a Co-Working space with all the services that has been a hit among buyers as even though they want to work from afar in their dream destination they want to socialize, have a good coffee and a quiet place to work away from the family running around in their condo."

Any final advice?

"Hurry up!! Look for experienced developers with a good track record. Take advantage of the low interest rates and remember that investing in real estate is all about location, location, location; stay close to the Ocean."

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Paseo Herencia is always fun and exciting to visit



NOORD— Paseo Herencia offers a variety of shopping, dining and entertainment options in an outdoor center located in the heart of Palm Beach.

Shopping

The Paseo Herencia stores offer a great collection in beach wear, clothing, perfume, shoes, jewelry, souvenirs and much more. Pamper yourself by visiting Maggy's and enjoy their salon services and shop for your favorite beauty products. Aruba Aloe has that perfect gift to bring back home, all made with natural ingredients. Other brand favorites are Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Aldo, Carmen Steffens, Quiksilver, Pandora and many more.

Restaurants

Start with a breakfast meal at Chill Out Island Café for a fluffy souffle pancake with your choice of toppings, breakfast sandwiches or acai bowls plus your favorite bubble tea. TGI Fridays offers breakfast options starting from \$8.57, available all day – every day. Go Argentinian style at Che Bar and try their delicious omelet with chorizo/ham, mozzarella, onions, peppers, and tomatoes



served with skillet potatoes and toast.

These restaurants are also open for lunch and dinner and will delight you with unique tastes. Choices run from Argentinian dishes to, Asian/Caribbean, International and Mexican at amongst others Iguana

Cantina. Sip and have a good time at the Bulldog Aruba located in the center of the Plaza. Open till 11pm.

VIP Cinema

Visit the one-of-a-kind Caribbean Cinemas VIP on the second floor of Paseo Herencia and enjoy your favorite movies with the latest projection and 7.1 Dolby surround sound with a delicious bag of popcorn.

Entertainment

Kids can enjoy the Paseo kids' activities, carousel & kiddie train, every day from 6pm to 10pm and do not forget to catch the nightly water shows at 7:30pm, 8:30pm and 9:30pm. Another fun activity is the The Range Airsoft Experience



located behind The Lazy Turtle. Snap Instagramable pictures at the Angel Wings located between Pandora and Quiksilver and another one in front of TGI Fridays. Catch a live Show on Friday by violinist Angela Flores and Saturday by the acrobatic group Ritmo Cubano at 8pm on the Plaza Padu.

With any purchase at Paseo Herencia you will re-

ceive FREE parking in the parking garage. Paseo Herencia has implemented all COVID protocols according to the Aruba Health & Happiness code. It is required to wear face masks when shopping or visiting the mall to ensure a safe environment.

To learn more, visit the Paseo Herencia Facebook or Instagram page. □

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Elements Restaurant Present Aruba's only Authentic Aruban & Caribbean Buffet A feast of traditional Aruban and Caribbean flavors and ingredients overlooking one of the most spectacular beaches in the world

EAGLE BEACH — Elements Restaurant, located at Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, proudly reveals its Authentic Aruban & Caribbean Buffet, available every Monday through Saturday from 12:30 PM to 3:00 PM for \$24.50 per person. On Sundays the restaurant continues with its famous Sunday Brunch.

"We wanted to create an authentic Aruban menu that, with each bite, will take you back-in-time to your childhood home. We want you to



relive the nostalgic flavors of the stews and desserts your parents and grandparents prepared. For our international customers, we want them to enjoy a traditional and culturally enriching dining experience." Ewald Biemans, owner/CEO of Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, explains.

Executive Chef Marc Giesbers, Director of Food and Beverage, and his team of local & Caribbean chefs have been working hard and testing out different dishes to reimagine your lunch dining experience. The rotating menu has everything from local cornbread to polenta sticks, plantains, corn patties, Aruban ceviche, seafood salad, sulz, pickled pork, blood sausage, cucumber or papaya stoba, beef or chicken stews, fish or chicken soup, jerk chicken, Caribbean seafood paella, a pasta station, and a dessert tasting of flan, cashew cake, local fruit cake, and much more! "Our team is incredibly diverse, and our buffet assortment highlights this. Besides our traditional local dishes made by our Aruban chefs and cooks, we also offer various Caribbean dishes created by our Jamaican, Dominican, Haitian, Colombian, and Venezuelan chefs and cooks. Each chef or cook concentrates on making an authentic dish from their region, highlighting the delightful palettes they remember from infancy." Chef Marc explains. "It is also important to us to support our local farmers as much as possible. Our assortment rotates to include ingredients that are in season, and we source as much as we can locally or from nearby regions." 1 The award-winning and adults-only beachfront restaurant will also continue to offer their regular a-la-carte menus, which cater to all dietary needs, includ-



ing vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free diets.

Don't forget that the restaurant also offers its ultra romantic private dinners for two in one of their famous beach cabanas. Guests can enjoy their meal and a Caribbean cocktail or mocktail overlooking the spectacular Eagle Beach on Elements' outdoor seating deck. Reservations are recommended and be mindful that the restaurant does not seat groups larger than six persons and does not take cash (all major credit and debit cards are accepted).

For reservations, please visit www.elements-aruba.com or call +297 583 1100. □

Emerald Ambassadors honored at Aruba Beach Club

EAGLE BEACH Recently, Kimberley Richardson of the Aruba Tourism Authority had the great pleasure to honor Aruba's loyal and friendly visitors as Emerald Ambassadors of Aruba. The Emerald Ambassador certificate is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, as a token of appreciation and to say 'Masha Danki', to the guests who visit Aruba 35 years and more consecutively.

The honorees were couple Mr. Bob and Mrs. Donna Zimmerman together with couple Mr. Andres and Mrs. Louise Abeal from U.S.A. The Emerald Ambassador certificate is the highest certificate that we present, and can you believe that both couples were honored as Emerald Ambassa-

dors of Aruba?! It is incredibly beautiful to see that Aruba has so many loyal visitors, and we hope to see them for many more years to come.

These wonderful people stated that they love the island very much, especially for its year-round sunny weather, nice sandy beaches and picturesque sunsets, delicious variety of foods, its safety and Aruba's warm and friendly people whom have become like family to them. These honorees not only fell in-love with the island, but also brought family, to our "One Happy Island".

Richardson together with the representatives of the Aruba Beach Club presented the certificates to the honorees, handed over



some presents and also thanked them for choosing Aruba as their favorite vacation destination and as their home-away-from-home. □

Heavy burden for consumers as holidays near: Soaring prices

By **CHRISTOPHER RUGABER**
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A worsening surge of inflation for such bedrock necessities as food, rent, autos and heating oil is setting Americans up for a financially difficult Thanksgiving and holiday shopping season.

Prices for U.S. consumers jumped 6.2% in October compared with a year earlier, leaving families facing their highest inflation rate since 1990, the Labor Department said Wednesday. From September to October, prices jumped 0.9%.

Inflation is eroding the strong gains in wages and salaries that have flowed to America's workers in recent months, creating a political threat to the Biden administration and congressional Democrats and intensifying pressure on the Federal Reserve as it considers how fast to withdraw its efforts to boost the economy.

Fueling the spike in prices has been robust consumer demand, which has run into persistent supply shortages from COVID-related factory shutdowns in China, Vietnam and other overseas manufacturers. America's employers, facing worker shortages, have also been handing out sizable pay raises, and many of them have raised prices to offset those higher labor costs.

The jump in inflation is hard-



ly confined to the U.S. Prices have been accelerating in Europe and elsewhere, too, with annual inflation in the 19 countries that use the euro currency exceeding 4% in October, the most in 13 years, and energy prices spiking 23%. In Brazil, inflation soared more than 10% in the 12 months through October, according to data released this week. Higher prices for electricity, cooking gas, meat and other staples have plunged many Brazilians further into financial instability.

Americans are now spending 15% more on goods than before the pandemic. Ports, trucking companies and railroads can't keep up, and the resulting bottle-

necks are swelling prices. Surging inflation has broadened beyond pandemic-disrupted industries into the many services that Americans spend money on, notably for restaurant meals, rental apartments and medical services, which jumped 0.5% in October. The accelerating price increases have fallen disproportionately on lower-earning households, which spend a significant portion of their incomes on food, rent, and gas. Food banks are struggling to assist the needy, with beef, egg and peanut butter prices jumping. Millions of households that are planning year-end travel, Thanksgiving dinners and holiday gift-giving will

be forced to pay much more this year.

At the same, the economy is managing to sustain its recovery from the pandemic recession, and consumers, on average, have plenty of money to spend. That is in contrast to the "stagflation" of the 1970s, when households endured the double hardship of high unemployment and high inflation.

Many Americans are also receiving healthy pay raises, especially workers at restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues, where hourly wages are up more than 10% from a year ago. And families, on average, have built up substantial savings from stimulus checks and enhanced un-

employment benefits.

"We're still looking at an economy in a strong position," said Sarah House, a senior economist at Wells Fargo. "The consumer is still going out and spending, which is why we are seeing the price gains we're seeing."

Used car prices jumped last month after having eased in August and September. The cost of a used vehicle has rocketed more than 25% from a year ago. With automakers sharply slowing production because of parts shortages, prices for new cars have risen for seven straight months. Furniture is more expensive. Grocery prices have climbed 5.4% in the past year, with the price of beef roasts leaping 25%. Bacon is up 20% from a year ago. The Biden administration has attributed higher meat prices to consolidation in the meat-packing industry, with lack of competition enabling big processors like Tyson's to raise prices. Meat-packing companies have countered that COVID-related shutdowns of plants, and the difficulty in finding workers to staff the factories when they reopened, are the culprit. Many Republicans in Congress have blamed President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion financial aid package, approved in March, for intensifying inflation. □

US jobless claims drop to pandemic low of 267,000

By **PAUL WISEMAN** AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell to a new pandemic low 267,000 last week as the job market recovers from last year's sharp coronavirus downturn.

Jobless claims fell by 4,000 last week, the Labor Department reported Wednesday.

The four-week average of claims, which smooths out weekly ups and downs, dropped by nearly 7,300 to 278,000, also a pandemic low.

Applications for unemploy-

ment aid have been falling mostly steadily since topping 900,000 in early January and are gradually nearing prepandemic levels of around 220,000 a week. Claims, a proxy for layoffs, have now dropped for six straight weeks.

There were 2.2 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment benefits the week that ended Oct. 30.

"Overall, the downtrend in filings is continuing and the level is moving closer to pre-pandemic levels," wrote Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Econom-

ics. "Businesses facing labor shortages are likely retaining rather than laying off workers."

The job market has been recovering for the past year and a half. In March and April of 2020, employers slashed more than 22 million jobs as governments ordered lockdowns and consumers and workers stayed home as a health precaution. Since then, employers have added more than 18 million jobs — including 531,000 last month — as the rollout of vaccines and government relief programs gave consumers the confidence and

financial wherewithal to resume spending.

Now many businesses, scrambling to keep up with demand, complain they can't find workers to fill their

job openings — a near-record 10.4 million in August. Still, the economy remains more than 4 million jobs short of where it stood in February 2020. □



CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 44 Set
1 Dog's
dogs
5 Gift bag
liner

- 11 Soothing
stuff

- 12 Black
Sea
port

- 13 Whittle
down

- 14 Straight

- 15 Makes
major
demands

- 17 Pig's
place

- 18 Heavy
drinker

- 22 Western
resort

- 24 Sleep
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- 25 — Jima

- 26 Relieve

- 27 "Meet
John Doe"

- 30 Fishing
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- 32 Band-
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- 33 Co. abbr.

- 34 Buffet
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- 38 Pleis-
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- 44 Set
45 Helper:
Abbr.

DOWN

- 1 One of a
bear trio

- 2 Weary
word

- 3 Artisans'
places

- 4 Handles

- 5 Turnpike
cost

- 6 Lunk-
heads

- 7 Forwarded

- 8 Toronto-
to-D.C.
dir.

- 9 Much of
N. Amer.

- 10 Corn
unit

- 16 Pro
vote

- 19 One of
Homer

- 20 Simpson's
favorite

- 21 War of
1812 port

- 22 Some
wines

- 22 Clock
sound

- 23 Not at
home

- 28 Sales offer

- 29 Region of
Spain

- 30 Tell
tales

- 31 Tenor
Bocelli

- 35 Lane's
co-worker

- 36 Big
galoots

- 37 Convene

- 38 Altar
promise

- 39 Sedan or
SUV

- 40 Yale
rooster

F	A	C	T	Q	U	A	S	A	R
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Yesterday's answer

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1				12					
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5				16					
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32					33				
			34	35			36	37	
38	39	40				41			
42						43			
44						45			

11-11

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

11-11

CRYPTOQUOTE

M X C E Y G Z D I O C U C L J E Y

L H L P Y D M N L R P R C L D P E

N C M M C O P R C L D — I G T O C R

U X P M Y C Z H O P D U E G R

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: IT IS AN IRONIC HABIT OF HUMAN BEINGS TO RUN FASTER WHEN WE HAVE LOST OUR WAY. — ROLLO MAY

Augmented reality project brings Olympics birthplace to life



OLYMPIA, Greece (AP)

— What would it be like to walk around the ancient religious sanctuary of Olympia when the Olympic Games were held?

An unusual partnership between Microsoft and Greece's Ministry of Culture and Sport is offering visitors the answer, launching an immersive tour Wednesday at one of the world's major archaeological sites.

The program at ancient Olympia harnesses augmented reality technology that designers say has the potential to transform education, business and entertainment. Critics warn it will extend the invasive power of U.S. tech giants.

The culture ministry helped Microsoft map and build virtual representations at Olympia, a site used for nearly a thousand years to host the games in ancient Greece that served as the inspiration for the modern Olympics.

"It's a milestone ... that helped us bring technology and culture and history together so we can preserve it," Microsoft President Brad Smith said in a video message at the launch event.

Users can tour the site remotely or in person with an online presentation and an augmented-like mobile app at Olympia, seeing a virtual re-creation of temples and competition areas as they walk through the ruins. At the Olympic Museum in Athens, they can use Microsoft's mixed-reality HoloLens headsets that overlay visual information on top of what the viewer sees.

Tilt up and a towering statue of Zeus plated in ivory and gold comes into

view; turn left and peer into the workshop used by the famed sculptor Phidias at the ancient sanctuary more than 2,400 years ago. "I'm absolutely thrilled that we're able to present to the world a completely new cultural experience using technology to re-create the ancient world of Olympia," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told The Associated Press after joining a group of schoolchildren using the app for the first time.

Seventh and eighth-graders from a local school pinched, zoomed and rotated the monuments that had been brought to life on their smartphones, flipping between inside and outside views as they toured the site where athletes in antiquity competed in running, javelin throwing, wrestling, boxing, horse racing and other events.

"The app is really impressive."

I think it can help with teaching in schools," one of the children, Panagiotis Christopoulos, said.

Microsoft started the project 18 months ago, scouring Olympia with drones and sensors, after reaching an agreement with the Greek government to build three data centers in greater Athens in an investment to reach up to \$1 billion.

Tech companies are racing to deliver mixed reality platforms and gear that would blend the internet with everyday experience, with glasses doubling as personal projectors to provide extra information like route options for bicyclists, player stats for fans at sports venues, or virtual fitting rooms

at home for shoppers.

It's part of what's being called the "metaverse," a futuristic online world aimed at merging real and virtual life.

Microsoft's HoloLens headset costs around \$3,500 and is typically used by people like doctors or those maintaining jetliners but a convergence of cheaper eyewear, ever-shrinking processing power and faster internet connections is starting to put it within mainstream reach, experts say.

"I think we're very close to a tipping point where we will see the kind of glasses that feel ordinary and that aren't abhorrent in terms of their physical size," said David Rose, author of the new book "SuperSight: What Augmented Reality Means for Our Lives, Our Work, and the Way We Imagine the Future."

"They'll have a decent battery life, most of the computing will be in the phone. And I think those will jump to tourism and education and other mainstream things like that, certainly within a couple of years," said Rose, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher and tech product designer.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen warned that the metaverse was likely to become addictive and rob people of yet more personal information. Rose said augmented reality could add "cognitive crutches" that would erode personal calculation skills and further segment societies, with each user immersed in their own realities. But despite the dangers, he remains optimistic. "They can be empathy machines and the most powerful educational tool ever invented," he said. "They can help with training and helping people develop new skills so that they're not out of the job. There are so many forces of potential here that I think it's mostly exciting." □

Classifieds

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'I'm so lucky': Elton John receives prestigious UK award

LONDON (AP) — Elton John has no doubt been a member of many exclusive clubs over the decades, but probably nothing quite as exclusive as the one he formally joined on Wednesday.

In an investiture ceremony at Windsor Castle, Prince Charles anointed the musician and charity patron as a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour.

It is one of the highest awards that can be bestowed by Charles' mother, Queen Elizabeth II, to citizens in Britain and across the Commonwealth. The 95-year-old monarch is also a member of the order.

Introduced in 1917 by her grandfather King George V, the award recognizes people who have made "a major contribution to the arts, science, medicine, or government lasting over a long period of time."

Current members include British environmentalist David Attenborough, Canadian author Margaret Atwood and one of Britain's



greatest-ever athletes Sebastian Coe.

The group, which in the past has included British wartime prime minister Winston Churchill and scientist Stephen Hawking, can only number a maximum of 65, excluding the sovereign, at any one time.

"I was quite taken aback when I got the letter to say that I'd received it because I know it's, very few people get it," John said after receiving the gold medallion with the inscription "In action faithful and in honour clear."

John, who was knighted

by the queen in 1998, a year after the death of his friend Diana, the Princess of Wales, joined the Companions of Honour in the queen's honors list in late 2019 for his services to music and charity.

The 74-year-old singer-songwriter, who walked

with the aid of an ornate stick after recent hip surgery, reflected on a career that has seen him release a hit single in every decade since the 1970s, including "Your Song," "Rocketman" and "Candle in the Wind." He also took a leading role in a number of charities, notably the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

"I've had an amazing life, music has been my life, and I got this for music and for work for charity," said John who was accompanied by his husband David Furnish. "So this is just a reminder that there's more to do. More work to do for music, more work to do for charity and life is great — I'm so lucky."

His farewell tour has been pushed back and will kick off next year, but it's clear he's more than just still standing despite the operation on his right hip.

"I've had a hip replacement but I'm full of beans and I'm full of zest, but this is just a prompter to say 'come on you've got more to do now,'" he said. □

María Becerra, from YouTuber to the Latin Grammys

By **SIGAL RATNER-ARIAS**

NEW YORK (AP) — Before she became one of the most popular Argentine singers of the last year, María Becerra was a YouTuber whose funny videos, in which she appeared bathing her cat and even shaving her face with foam, generated millions of views. But her true passion was music, not comedy, and now she is nominated for the Latin Grammy for best new artist.

"I was such a character," she says about her teenage years producing her own videos. "And I was always like that, inventing plays or scripts in my head that I wanted the world to see ... I was always very involved in everything related to art. I did a lot of theater but I was also very involved in self-management. I liked being very independent when doing my stuff".

That's something that stuck with her as an emerging Latin urban singer: Becerra does not have a record label, only distribution. Still, in the last few months she appeared in Argentina's Spotify Top 10 with collaborations like "Wow Wow" with Becky G, "Antes de Ti" with Rusherking,

ing, "Mal Acostumbrado" with Mau and Ricky and the international hit "Qué Más Pues?" with J Balvin.

Mostly a reggaeton singer-songwriter, although she has also performed R&B and bachata, in 2019 she debuted with the single "222" and two years later released the EP "Animal, Part 1", which was followed this year by her first full album, "Animal". She has also appeared in multiple remixes with popular artists, such as "En Tu Cuerpo" with Lyanno, Rauw Alejandro and Lenny Tavárez, "AYNEA" with FMK and Beret, and "Además de Mí" with Rusherking, Khea and Duki, Lit Killah and Tiago PzK, her first No. 1 on Argentina's Hot 100.

"It would be a great achievement for me if I can maintain my career like this," working independently, says the 21-year-old artist, who started at 12 by posting her first video on Facebook (a 5 minute parody monologue that was viewed over a million times in just a few hours). "I know that there comes a point where it is very difficult to pay all the expenses, because the videos, everything, I pay for it. ... But my goal would be to have my own

record company. That would be incredible".

Becerra will compete for the Latin Grammy with Giulia Be, Bizarrap, Boza, Zoe Gotusso, Humbe, Rita Indiana, Lasso, Paloma Mami, Marcos Mares and Juliana Velásquez. The awards ceremony will be November 18 in Las Vegas, where she says she'd love to meet Rosalía, Karol G and Natti Natasha.

In a recent interview from Buenos Aires, she also spoke of her first steps in music and a wave of urban artists hailing from Argentina, a country best known for tango and rock en español. Remarks have been edited for brevity and clarity.

AP: How was the transition from YouTuber to singer?

BECERRA: I think the transition happened when I got to a point where making the videos, which fascinated me but was a lot of work, was not filling me. It was not something I wanted to do all my life. So I reached a point where I was 17, 18 years old, that I said: "I'm investing a lot of time in this and I really want to be a singer, I want to make my music, write my own songs." I thought: "Thank God I am well

known with what I do and I feel that the audience that has supported me a lot and that also supported my music," because at the same time that I was making my videos, I had released three songs, I was doing covers, and people also knew me for that. AP: You are part of a group of emerging artists from Argentina that includes Nikki Nicole, Bizarrat, Tiago PZK. What do you think of this movement in country? We're used to seeing reggaeton artists from Puerto Rico, Colombia, but from Argentina it seems like something newer.

BECERRA: Yes, it is much newer. I think that one of the first Argentines to do reggaeton was Cazzu with her album "Maldades". There are many more too, but it was more underground. While in Puerto Rico and Colombia there were J Balvin, Daddy Yankee, Farruko, De La Ghetto, pioneers that have been for a long time in the industry, we were just starting because here national rock was king. But I think that thanks to those who paved the way, like Cazzu, whom I admire a lot, things have gotten easier for us. □

Revised injured reserve rules keeping NFL teams competitive

By **TERESA M. WALKER** AP
Pro Football Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) —

The day after making final roster cuts, the Tennessee Titans put three players on injured reserve.

And they haven't stopped. Derrick Henry is just the biggest name in a revolving door that has seen the Titans make 19 moves putting players on injured reserve and play a NFL-high 80 different players — 11 more than the next closest teams, Indianapolis and Carolina (69 apiece).

With Tennessee currently atop the AFC with a 7-2 record halfway through the season, general manager Jon Robinson doesn't even want to imagine how he would have managed his roster without the NFL's current injured reserve and expanded practice squad rules.

"I don't even want to go there mentally, I don't know if my brain could take it," Robinson said. "But I mean, it would be challenging, it would be tough. You would end up having to release some players, release healthy players in order to get positions that have injuries at those spots."

The Titans have plenty of company using the NFL rules first changed in 2020 for the coronavirus pandemic and retained for this season. According to Sportradar, 23 NFL teams have put at least 10 players on injured reserve at some point since the preseason, and every team has used at least 55 different players already.

Going on injured reserve in the NFL used to mean a



player's season was over. In 2012, the NFL allowed teams to designate one player to return, then doubled that in 2017. The coronavirus pandemic led to the biggest change yet: Allowing NFL teams to bring back an unlimited number of players from injured reserve, which was extended for this season.

Players must spend at least three games on injured reserve. That plus the expanded practice squad and the ability to promote a couple of practice squad players for games has essentially expanded the roster well beyond 53.

Whether the unlimited return rule, or the expanded practice squad, are kept will be decided in the next offseason.

"We will discuss future options for the rule with the relevant committees and the NFLPA after the season," NFL senior vice president of football and international communications Michael

Signora said.

Baltimore coach John Harbaugh calls the ability to bring back an unlimited number of players huge allowing the Ravens to navigate injuries that started with losing running backs J.K. Dobbins and Gus Edwards and cornerback Marcus Peters. They currently have 13 on IR with three others designated for return.

That's why the Ravens (6-2) have kept only 50 or 51 on their roster at times to be ready when players return for the AFC North leaders.

"Thank goodness for the roster flexibility," Harbaugh said. "Let's hope that stays in place going forward, because I don't really see too much downside to it. I'm sure they'll tighten it up somehow, but it's been very positive."

Saints coach Sean Payton calls the current injured reserve rule cost effective. New Orleans (5-3) is second in the NFC South despite

having used 68 players.

"If a player can come back in four, five, six weeks, the fans want to see a starter getting paid (playing) and not someone else sitting on IR getting paid," Payton said. "So, it makes a lot of sense."

New York Giants coach Joe Judge has used 68 players this season, said fans want to see the NFL's best players play. Yes, coaches' jobs will be easier, but the result is a better product.

"The ability of having somebody and not losing them for the year, I think that's just a plus for everyone involved," Judge said. "You don't want to see any of your players not play."

Unlimited return also is good for players needing more than a couple of weeks to recover from an injury.

The Colts got three-time All-Pro guard Quenton Nelson back from injured reserve after he missed the first three games of his career with a sprained right ankle

this season. Cleveland put running back Kareem Hunt on IR on Oct. 19 and got wide receiver Jarvis Landry back from a knee injury after three games.

Tennessee has gotten a pair of defensive starters back in safety Amani Hooker and linebacker Jayon Brown.

Cleveland left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. has dealt with ankle injuries this season, but hasn't gone on injured reserve like teammate Jack Conklin.

"I feel like it's very helpful to those players that know for a fact they won't be out there for X-amount of weeks," Willis said. "I feel like it's very helpful for them to go on, get healthy and then come back."

When the Titans put Henry on injured reserve, they refused to put a timeline on a potential return this season because they don't have to. If he heals up before the Titans' season ends, they will have a chance to bring back the man who was the NFL rushing leader when he broke his right foot.

The current rules also allowed them to sign Adrian Peterson, the 2012 NFL MVP with nearly 15,000 career rushing yards.

Peterson signed first to the practice squad, giving Tennessee a chance to see what he looked like with the offense before putting him on the roster.

When these rules are discussed at the NFL spring meetings in March, the Titans GM knows what he wants. "I would certainly be in favor of kind of keeping things the way they are," Robinson said. □

Former US defender Besler retires after 13 years in MLS

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Former U.S. men's national team defender Matt Besler, who spent 13 seasons in Major League Soccer and was a five-time All-Star, announced his retirement Wednesday.

Besler played 47 matches for the national team from

2013-2017, including all four matches of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, where the U.S. advanced to the round of 16.

Besler, 34, played 12 seasons with Sporting Kansas City, then signed as a free agent with Austin, where he played 20 matches this

season for the expansion club. He was the MLS defender of the year in 2012 and helped Kansas City win the league championship in 2013. He also was a member of the U.S. national team that won the CONCACAF Gold Cup championship in 2013 and 2017. □



Oldie but goodie Patterson an offensive breakout star in '21

By **ARNIE STAPLETON** AP Pro Football Writer
ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP)

— It's hard to think of a 30-year-old veteran, a four-time All-Pro and four-time Pro Bowl selection as a breakout player.

But that's exactly what Cordarrelle Patterson has become in his first season with the Falcons, transforming himself from a kick return specialist and spot wide receiver into a bona fide threat out of Atlanta's backfield.

"Honestly, it doesn't matter where they put me on the football field," Patterson said. "I just try to go out there and make a play for my team. It's something I've been doing my whole life."

With nine years under his belt and on his fifth NFL team since the Minnesota Vikings used a first-round pick on him in 2013, Patterson is making the most of the first feature role he's really ever had.

Patterson leads the Falcons (4-4) with a single-season career-high 737 yards from scrimmage (459 receiv-



ing, 278 rushing) and seven touchdowns.

In eight games, he has rushed 73 times for 278 yards and two scores. He has also caught a team-leading 38 passes out of the backfield for 459 yards and a team-best five touchdowns. And, he has returned 14 kickoffs

for 332 yards.

Patterson is the first player to record at least 10 rushing touchdowns (10), 10 receiving touchdowns (15) and five kickoffs returned for touchdowns (eight) in his career since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970.

"He's an incredibly versatile

player," Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan said. "He runs the ball. Physical, hard. Has the ability to come out the back end at any time. Then was drafted as a wide receiver in this league. You can put him out there and he can go do what wide receivers do."

"Not many people on this planet have that versatility."

With the NFL relaxing jersey number rules this season, Patterson has kept his No. 84.

"I still feel like it's Roddy White sometimes when I'm handing the ball off. It's kind of strange," Ryan said. "If you produce, who cares what number you wear when you're handing the ball off to him?"

Patterson also makes an impact catching passes, including the 64-yarder with a minute left Sunday that set up Atlanta's 27-25 upset at New Orleans.

Patterson's steady production as a receiver out of the backfield has helped the Falcons withstand the absence of No. 1 wide receiver Calvin Ridley, who was placed on the reserve/non-football injury list to focus on his mental health.

"We need to continue to try and get him touches and find ways to get him the ball," Ryan said of Patterson, "because he's a playmaker." □

Blackhawks win again under King, topping Penguins 3-2

CHICAGO (AP) — Derek King smiled. Sure, there's work to do, he said, but he is seeing positive signs for the Chicago Blackhawks.

"There's some cleaning up to do, obviously," the interim coach said. "But at least, the battle level's there. The accountability is there, and you can see these guys are actually playing for each other."

Marc-Andre Fleury made 42 saves and then two more stops in the shootout, and the Blackhawks won

again under King by topping the Pittsburgh Penguins 3-2 on Tuesday night. King took over after Jeremy Colliton was fired Saturday following a 1-9-2 start for a team that began the season with playoff aspirations. King said he wanted the Blackhawks to have more fun, and they responded with dramatic victories in each of his first two games. "Winning makes everything better," defenseman Seth Jones said.

Jones and Jujhar Khaira

scored in regulation for Chicago, which lost 5-2 at Pittsburgh on Oct. 16. Jonathan Toews and Alex DeBrincat converted their shootout opportunities.

Jeff Carter scored twice and Tristan Jarry had 30 saves for Pittsburgh, which lost for the fifth time in six games. The Penguins came up empty on three power-play chances, including a shot by Kasperii Kapanen that went off a post early in the third period.

"When they came into our building we were on our toes," Carter said. "We played our game from the get-go. Tonight, a lot of changes here for them the last few days. They came out with a lot of energy."

Chicago jumped in front when Toews skated behind the net before finding Khaira in front 2:14 into the second. Jones then made it 2-0 when he beat Jarry on the stick side from the right circle with 4:07 left in

the period.

It was the first goal for each player in their first season with the Blackhawks.

"It feels nice. I've shot the puck a lot this year and it hasn't gone in," Jones said. "I just told myself, 'Keep shooting.'"

Pittsburgh got one back when Carter tipped Jake Guentzel's pass between Fleury's legs 5:34 into the third.

The Penguins controlled much of the action in the final period. Evan Rodrigues nearly stuffed one home with 9:42 left. Brian Boyle's backhand was smothered by Fleury with 6:00 to go.

After Jarry denied Mike Hardman on a breakaway, the Penguins skated the other way and Guentzel set up Carter again in front for the tying score at 15:43. It was Carter's third goal of the season.

"A great response by the team. We were not overly pleased with the first two

periods," said assistant Todd Reirden, who served as Pittsburgh's acting head coach for the third straight game with Mike Sullivan sidelined by COVID-19. "We took our urgency to a higher level."

It was a sweet win for Fleury, who allowed four goals on 10 shots in the first meeting between the teams. The veteran goaltender broke into the NHL with Pittsburgh and won three Stanley Cup titles with the Penguins.

"I was happy to get the nod and get a crack at them again," Fleury said. "It was frustrating last time and embarrassing for me."

COVID-19 UPDATE

Penguins defensemen Chad Ruhwedel and Marcus Pettersson went through the final stage of the NHL's COVID-19 protocol and skated at the team's practice facility. Captain Sidney Crosby, defenseman Brian Dumoulin and Sullivan remain in the protocol. □

